

Confronting False Narratives in the Debate over Immigration

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As teachers guide students through the often contentious issue of immigration, they are likely to be faced with numerous stereotypes that students hold to be true. Politicians and media figures repeat false narratives so frequently that the general public often assumes them to be accurate. A prime example from 2016 is then-presidential candidate Donald Trump’s quip about Mexican immigrants,

They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us [sic]. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.¹

Similar accusations have been levied against previous generations of immigrants. The current anxieties towards immigrants are often based on recycled nativist arguments. Media pundits and opportunistic politicians often exploit public anxieties to increase ratings and support, and the false narratives get passed down from generation to generation. The classroom may be one of the few settings where evidence and reason can address popularly held fears and challenge unsubstantiated claims, or in the jargon of the day, “fake news.”

Three false narratives lend themselves well to classroom investigation due to

their pervasiveness: (1) Too many immigrants enter the United States; (2) Immigrants are a threat to personal and national security; and (3) Immigrants take jobs away from U.S. citizens and harm the economy.

In this article, we show both the pervasiveness of each myth and some of the faulty reasoning that each is based upon. We include illustrative political cartoons and questions for discussion with increasing levels of complexity for various grade levels.

Analyzing and Discussing Political Cartoons

Political cartoons provide a rich way of illustrating popular discourse and introducing students to the presence of this discourse across time. Artists draw cartoons aiming to provide a quick, easy-to-understand political message, but those messages sometimes reinforce negative stereotypes. This makes political cartoons particularly useful visuals for students who are learning about political rhetoric and arguments and for teachers who want to model media literacy skills and critical thinking. We suggest using political cartoon document analysis tools available from the Library of Congress or the National Archives to support student investigations. The Library of Congress teacher’s guide, for example, invites students to walk through

a process of “Observe, Reflect, and Question.”²

Additionally, teachers can encourage students to find data from reputable sources online that will likely further debunk each of the following three false narratives discussed. For example, when investigating False Narrative #3, students can find information about the impact of immigration on the U.S. economy from the Institute for Taxation and Economic Policy³ or the Presidential Council of Economic Advisors.⁴ Structuring lessons in this way will meet a number of curriculum standards.⁵ Teachers may provide further resources, so students can cross-check the statistics and information and retain a critical approach to the information presented in the class.⁶

False Narrative # 1: “Immigrants are Entering the Country at an Alarming Rate”

According to conservative journalist Cal Thomas, writing in 2015, we should be fearful of the “flood of immigrants from Muslim countries among whom terrorists are surely hiding.”⁷ Two of the most widely seen television ads of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign (by candidates Ted Cruz and Donald Trump) portrayed an unstoppable wave of immigrants crossing the Mexican border.⁸

Evidence, however, disputes these perceptions. Data from 1850 to 2010

show that the foreign born population of the United States, which includes legal and undocumented immigrants, was almost 2 percent lower in 2010 than at the turn of the twentieth century (Figure 1).⁹ Furthermore, border detentions decreased from 2000 to 2014 (Figure 2), due possibly, at least in part, to “aggressive immigration enforcement at the border” by the Obama administration.¹⁰

Figure 3 and Figure 4 are political cartoons conveying the xenophobic fears that (1) immigrants are arriving in great numbers and that (b) they threaten our security (which we’ll discuss in the next section). In the cartoon from 1903 (Figure 3), waves of Italian immigrants are caricatured as rats with dark human faces carrying weapons. Uncle Sam, overwhelmed, is depicted remembering President McKinley, who was assassinated by the son of an immigrant two years prior. In a cartoon from 2009 (Figure 4), the Statue of Liberty is being overrun by (and her arm torn off by the weight of) riotous mobs of illegal immigrants (who are tiny, so their skin color or place of origin is not clearly defined).

Questions for Discussion — False Narrative #1

For grades 7–8: Who measures whether immigration is increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same? Where can we look to find this information? Is there a pattern over years and decades? How do the data look when graphed?

For grades 9–10: Do the data about immigration support or counter the argument that legal immigration is increasing rapidly? That illegal immigration is increasing?

For grades 11–12: What political, social, and economic concerns might be motivating people who state that there is “too much immigration”?

False Narrative # 2: “Immigrants Threaten Our National and Personal Security”

Refugees and asylum seekers are an important subset of all immigrants, since

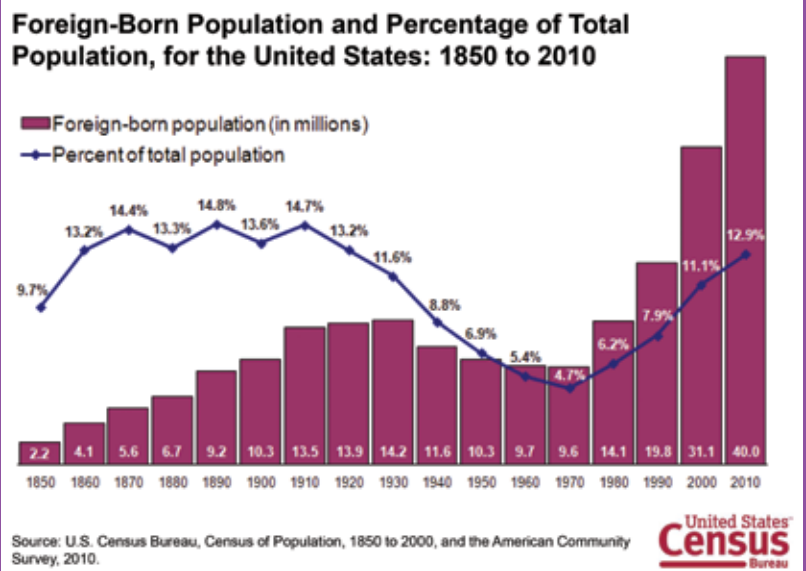


Figure 1. U.S. Census Bureau, “Foreign-Born Population and Percentage of Total Population, for the United States: 1850 to 2010,” www.census.gov/newsroom/pdf/cspan_fb_slides.pdf.

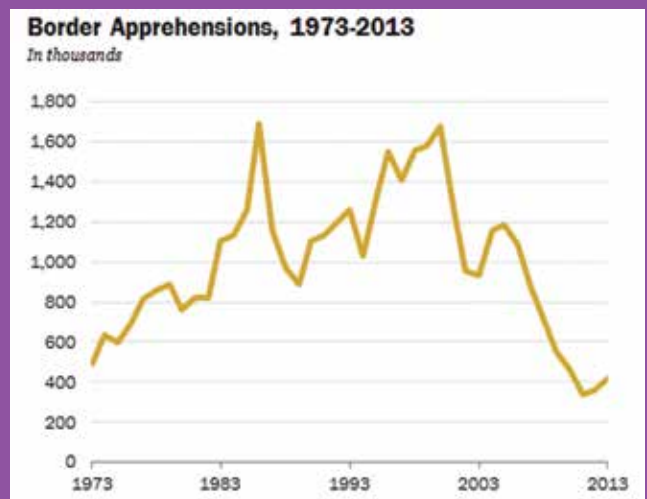


Figure 2. Pew Research Center. “Border Apprehensions, 1973-2013” (2013).

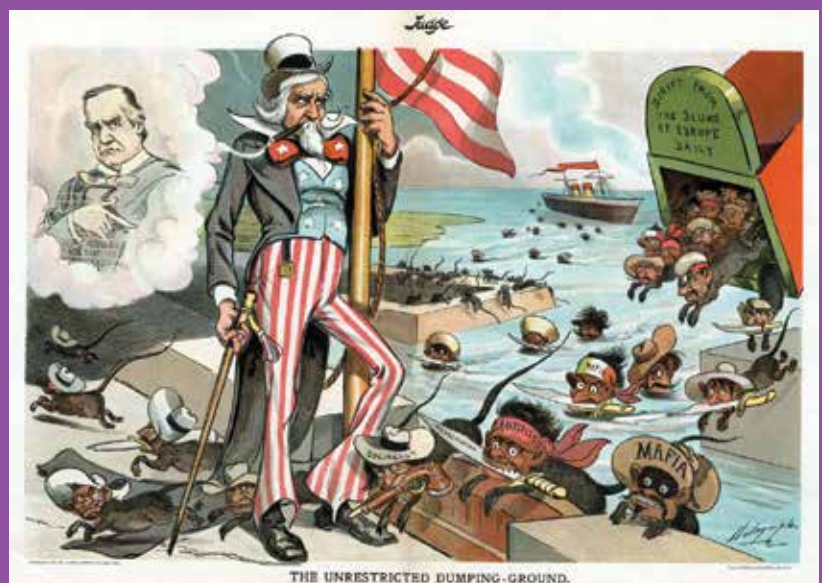


Figure 3. “The Unrestricted Dumping Ground,” (1903) *Judge Magazine*.

for them, admittance to the United States may be a matter of life or death. To Americans, however, immigrants arriving from areas of violent conflict may seem like a potential threat to “homeland” and personal security: What if these newcomers bring violent behaviors with them?¹¹

After a 2015 massacre of 130 civilians in Paris by Islamic extremists, several U.S. state governors called for a ban of Syrian refugees into this country. Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) said, “Who in their right mind would want to bring over tens of thousands of Syrian refugees, when we cannot determine ... who is and isn’t a terrorist?”¹² Despite such rhetoric, about 750,000 refugees have settled in the United States between September 11th 2001 and 2015 and only two have been arrested on terrorist charges, both involved supporting Al Qaeda in Iraq, not for planning an attack in the United States.¹³

Some politicians and media figures will state that immigrants are more inclined to criminal activity than the general population. Others will imply it by focusing on a crime committed by one undocumented immigrant (see note on terminology).¹⁴ Thus raising it to a national story, while overlooking similar crimes committed by U.S. nationals. Take, for example, the 2015 murder of San Francisco resident Katherine Steinle, by an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, Francisco Sanchez.¹⁵ The story gained national notoriety, and many used it to warn of the dangers of “sanctuary cities,” whose city governments and agencies (e.g., local police) decline to cooperate, to varying degrees, with federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) personnel and regulations.¹⁶

Although this crime was certainly tragic, it is doubtful that the story would have gained the same attention if a non-immigrant had committed it. Though the belief that immigrants are more prone to crime may be widespread, the actual rates of “immigrant incarceration” are about three percentage points lower than those of the native-born population.¹⁷ A 2007



Figure 4. Dave Granlund, “Illegal Immigration,” Davegranlund.com (2009).



Figure 5. Thomas Nash, “The Day We Celebrate,” *Harpers Weekly* (April 6, 1867).

Immigration Policy Center study found that “for every ethnic group without exception, incarceration rates among young men are lowest for immigrants. This held true especially for Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans, who make up the bulk of the undocumented population.”¹⁸

The stereotype of immigrant violence has been widely held for the last two

centuries in the United States. A cartoon from 1867 (Figure 5) portrays the Irish as violent drunks with simian faces celebrating St. Patrick’s Day. A cartoon from 2015 (Figure 6) shows the perceived danger of the sanctuary city movement, warning it will lead to the deaths of “U.S. victims.” Although in 2016, it is not socially acceptable to draw immigrants as primates, the message in



Figure 6. A.F. Branco, "At His Feet," *Legal Insurrection* (July 9, 2015), <http://legalinsurrection.com/2015/07/branco-cartoon-at-his-feet/>.

both cartoons is the same—immigrants are a threat to the “native population” and cannot be trusted. These examples can also lead to discussions about how anxieties around personal safety and fear of new and unknown groups can lead to biased personal attitudes and discriminatory public policy.

Questions for Discussion — False Narrative # 2

For grades 7–8: Why do you think immigrants are perceived as dangerous in many different times and places in history?

For grades 9–10: Why do you think a randomly picked immigrant might be less likely to commit a crime than a randomly picked native-born American (as determined by actual crime statistics)? (See notes 17 and 18)

For grades 11–12: What do you think were the motivations of the cartoonists

who created the cartoons in 1867 and 2015? How could you investigate that question further as a student of history and sociology?

False Narrative # 3: “Immigrants Take Jobs Away from U.S. Citizens and Harm the Economy”

Many also accuse immigrants of increasing unemployment, hurting native workers, and damaging the overall economy. It may seem reasonable that increased immigration damages the American workforce by creating more competition in the labor market. Those who insist that immigrants take away jobs have been repeating the assertion for so long and with so little challenge that their claim is accepted as fact even without any evidence to support it.¹⁹ A poll by Reuters in 2014 found that 63 percent of the public felt that immigrants place a burden on the economy.²⁰

Although popular perception is that immigrants are taking jobs and destroying the economy, the economic information does not bear this out. As economist David Card states, “Evidence has accumulated over the past two decades that local labor market outcomes are only weakly correlated with immigrant densities.”²¹ Two prominent economic studies on this topic both show an actual modest wage growth for native workers due to increased immigration.²² One of the false assumptions related to immigration and employment is the idea that there are a fixed number of jobs in the economy. This argument fails to take into account the new jobs that immigrants create by the increased economic activity and demand. It also fails to consider the businesses immigrants create. For example, a 2008 study found that “immigrants are nearly 30 percent more likely to start a business than are nonimmigrants.”²³ In short, although immigrants are filling some jobs, evidence shows they are also creating many others.

Political cartoons document the resilience of these economic discourses across time. A political cartoon from 1878 (Figure 7) shows the negative sentiment towards Chinese workers as they are taking American jobs while at the same time being supported by American citizens. A cartoon from 2011 (Figure 8) takes a humorous jab at former President Obama’s immigration policy; a pun suggests that it has had a negative impact on the economy, leading to the closing of the Borders bookstore chain.²⁴ Teachers can further discuss the role that fears of economic uncertainty and job insecurity can have on citizens’ attitudes towards immigrants or individuals of different racial groups and social classes.

Questions for Discussion—False Narrative # 3

For grades 7–8: In what ways do new immigrants create new jobs?

For grades 9–10: In what ways can immi-

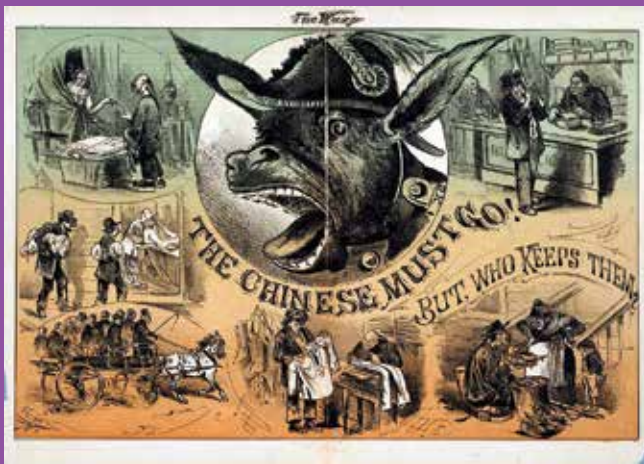


Figure 7. George Frederick Keller, "The Chinese Must Go," *San Francisco Illustrated Wasp* (May 11, 1878).



Figure 8. Gary McCoy, "Closed Borders," *Cagle Cartoons* (July 23, 2011).

grants change economic activity as individuals? And as a group?

For grades 11–12: In the United States, many immigrants work at the lowest paying jobs. In what ways is this *not* equivalent to saying that "Immigrants take away jobs from U.S. citizens." What statistics give weight to the former statement and discredit the latter?

Conclusion

Issues of immigration and the tension between cultural pluralism and nation-

alistic nativism have always been a part of political debate in the United States. Ultimately, xenophobic arguments prove to be not only unsubstantiated, but to perpetuate resentment and antagonism toward immigrant populations. The social studies classroom should be the place where students scrutinize data (and how data are presented), critique statements, and examine beliefs—including their own.

Political rhetoric about immigration in the United States is typically focused either on exclusion or inclusion. The

2016 presidential election demonstrated the theme of exclusion to such an extreme that candidates like Ted Cruz and Donald Trump were calling for the deportation of the 11 million undocumented immigrants²⁵ as well as a complete ban on immigrants from majority-Muslim countries.²⁶ As the historical cartoons here illustrate, when themes of exclusion have gained ascendancy in U.S. political discourse, politicians have tapped into nativist sentiments and made immigrants the scapegoat for economic problems and national insecurities that merit more thoughtful analysis.

Negative attitudes towards immigrant children are pervasive and hurtful, and the perpetuation of these attitudes in the classroom diminishes academic achievement as well as harming the self-worth and emergent identities of students.²⁷ The activities we have outlined encourage students to explore current data, examine primary historical documents, and engage one another in active conversation. Students can use these critical skills to examine other popular narratives and develop their own critical stance on the issues. Most important, teachers can encourage students to empathetically consider the impact of these debates on the lives of their fellow students and neighbors. 🌍

Notes

1. Donald Trump, "Presidential Bid Announcement" (Speech, New York, N.Y., June 16, 2015).
2. "Teacher's Guide: Analyzing Political Cartoons," Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Political_Cartoons.pdf; "Cartoon Analysis Worksheet," National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/cartoon_analysis_worksheet.pdf.
3. Institute for Taxation and Economic Policy, "News, Research, and Reports about State Policy," www.itpepnet.org.
4. Presidential Council of Economic Advisors, "The Economic Effects of Administrative Action on Immigration," (November 2014), www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/cea_2014_economic_effects_of_immigration_executive_action.pdf.
5. Common Core State Standards (CSS) in ELA-Literacy, particularly those focused on identifying points of view and analyzing sources (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.8, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.7, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.6).

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Teaching about DACA

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The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program gained greater national attention in September 2017, following the Trump administration's efforts to rescind the policy. To date, a court order has allowed the program to continue, but its future is in jeopardy.¹ There is much confusion about DACA and how it affects the lives of young immigrants. Social studies teachers can help students gain a basic understanding of the program and its impact on people in their communities.

History of DACA

Concerns about undocumented students have loomed for decades. Children who typically had no say in their parents' decision to bring them illegally to the United States face uncertain educational futures in this country. The DREAM Act, which passed the House of Representatives in 2010, was intended to allow immigrants who came into the country illegally as children to gain legal status and, ultimately, citizenship. However, it was blocked by five votes in a Senate filibuster.² This was why, in 2012, President Barack Obama created the DACA program by executive order. DACA is not a long-term legislative solution and does not grant these young people citizenship. However, it provides undocumented children who meet eligibility requirements temporary work visas and protection from deportation. To qualify for DACA, an individual must have entered the United States before the age of 16, have been under the age of 31 in 2012, have no serious criminal offenses, be in high school or have graduated from high school, and have come to the country before June 15, 2007.³ The policy is restrictive and denies eligibility to young undocumented immigrants who have come into the country over the last decade. DACA remains a controversial and temporary remedy for only some of the hundreds of thousands of undocumented young people in the United States.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Despite its occasional prominence in the news, most K-12 students do not understand how DACA affects people they may know, nor the implications of President Donald Trump's decision to rescind it. Below are some suggestions on how teachers can help students understand this important national issue.

Background

Teachers can provide information about DACA and the rights of undocumented students by introducing information about the Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), which prohibited schools from denying students a public education based on their immigration status. However, *Plyler* did not extend educational access for undocumented students to higher education. Teachers could ask students to consider why a program such as DACA is necessary. One idea is to have students look at the barriers in the immigration system to gaining legal status for those who entered the country illegally or whose visas have expired. This could help deconstruct the misconception that it is easy for immigrants, including those who are in the country illegally, to apply for and obtain citizenship.⁴

Compelling and Supporting Questions

Teachers can design critical compelling questions in the model of the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc that frame classroom inquiry and debate, for example, around social injustice and unequal

power relations.⁵ Some examples include: *Is it possible to create a fair and just immigration policy? Should all people have the right to migrate? Why do immigrants come to the United States without authorization? And, How has immigration policy changed over time?* These questions hold a potential link to history and social studies standards for the study of past and contemporary immigration. By exploring these questions, students can gain a more critical perspective on current policy and take informed action on this highly controversial area.

Personal Stories

Many DACA recipients have been vocal about their status and want to educate others about their experiences. Teachers who would like to invite a DACA recipient to speak to their class, can contact local immigrant advocacy groups to find a guest speaker. Having an individual with DACA status speak to the class provides a face to an issue that might otherwise seem intangible, and it allows students to clarify questions they may have. Students can also read narratives from DACA recipients or watch documentaries about the program.⁶ Understanding the individual stories moves the issue of DACA beyond policy or law to an issue students can identify with.

State Policies for DACA Recipients

Another aspect that teachers can highlight is how the rights of

DACA recipients vary across states. For example, some states provide in-state tuition and state licensure for these individuals, while others states prohibit DACA recipients from obtaining these benefits. Students can examine their own states' policies and how they differ from other states nationwide. They could also examine statements that local politicians have made in regard to DACA and DREAMers.

Informed Action

There are numerous ways teachers can help students apply their new-found knowledge. Students could write congressional representatives regarding their own views on the issue. Students could also conduct interviews with community members to gauge awareness and opinions about DACA. Students might also create a short media presentation that highlights the history of the program, the debate surrounding the topic, and how the program has affected individuals in the local area. 🌍

Notes

1. Miriam Johnson, "U.S. Must Keep DACA and Accept New Applications, Federal Judge Rules," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2018.
2. Andy Sullivan and Donna Smith, "Dream Act Immigration Bill Blocked in Senate," *Reuters*, December 18, 2010.
3. United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals," Retrieved from <https://www.uscis.gov/archive/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca>
4. Part of this may be due to the fact that United States is still often referred to as a land of immigrants, even though the policies towards immigrants have become more restrictive over recent decades. The *American Immigration Council* has created a web activity entitled "Entry Denied" where students can examine the difficulty and barriers of hypothetical individuals seeking to legally immigrate into the United States.
5. Ryan M. Crowley and LaGarrett J. King, "Making Inquiry Critical: Examining Power and Inequity in the Classroom." *Social Education* 82, no. 1 (2018): 14–17.
6. Mele Mason, *WE ARE DREAMERS*, Immigration Legal Center, 2018; Jennifer Castillo and Saray Deiseil, *American DREAMERS*, Los Angeles: Indigo Project Media, 2015.

- 10.9). Furthermore, comparing and contrasting the way political cartoonists have treated immigration narratives over time will help students explore issues salient to NCSS Thematic Strand 2 **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**.
6. "Room for Debate, Immigration," *The New York Times*, nytimes.com/roomfordebate/topics/immigration; "PBS Newshour on the Immigration," Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/newshour/tag/immigration; "How Have Americans Responded to Immigration? Weighing the Evidence," National Archives, www.docsteach.org/activities/teacher/how-have-americans-responded-to-immigration; Migration Policy Center, www.migrationpolicy.org.
7. Cal Thomas, "Stop the Immigration Flood," *Washington Times* (February 25, 2015).
8. Ted Cruz, "Invasion," (January 25, 2016); Donald Trump, "First Official Campaign Ad for TV," (January 4, 2016).
9. U.S. Census Bureau, "Foreign-Born Population and Percentage of Total Population, for the United States: 1850 to 2010," www.census.gov/newsroom/pdf/cspan_fb_slides.pdf.
10. "Border Enforcement Policies Ensnare Parents of U.S. Citizen Children" (Human Rights Watch, 2015), www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/08/border-enforcement-policies-ensnare-parents-us-citizen-children.
11. Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States (Migration Policy Institute, March 8, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states.
12. Ted Cruz, cited by Patrick Healy and Julie Bosman, "G.O.P. Governors Vow to Close Doors to Syrian Refugees," *The New York Times* (November 16, 2015).
13. "Why America Does Not Take in More Syrian Refugees," *The Economist* (October 18, 2015).
14. There is often confusion about the terms illegal immigrant, illegal alien, and undocumented immigrant. All three terms refer to the same group of people who have either never obtained legal status in the nation or have lost that legal status. The majority of these immigrants have this unrecognized immigration status either due to illegal border crossing or overstaying a temporary visa, such as a student or tourist visa. Many find the terms "illegal immigrant" or "illegal alien" derogatory and choose instead to use the term undocumented immigrant, which we have chosen to use in this article; A visual explanation regarding the process of obtaining legal status can be found at: joshuablankenship.com/blog/images/immigration.jpg
15. Sanchez, a 54-year-old Mexican citizen, "had been on track for a sixth deportation after serving 46 months in prison for felony re-entry into the country, but was released from San Francisco jail rather than being turned over to immigration agents under the city's sanctuary policies," as reported by Vivian Ho, "SF Murder Case behind Kate's Law Inching Toward Trial," *San Francisco Chronicle* (June 29, 2017), www.sfchronicle.com; Judson Berger, "San Francisco Prosecutors Charge Illegal Immigrant with Killing Woman at Pier," Fox News (July 6, 2015).
16. Further explanation and a detailed map regarding sanctuary cities and states are available at: Jasmine C. Lee, Rudy Omri, and Julia Preston, "What Are Sanctuary Cities?" *The New York Times* (September 9, 2016), www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/09/02/us/sanctuary-cities.html.
17. Kristin Butcher and Anne Morrison Piehl, "Why are Immigrants' Incarceration Rates So Low? Evidence on Selective Immigration, Deterrence, and Deportation," (Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, November 2015).
18. Ruben Rumbaut and Walter Ewing, "The Myth of Immigrant Criminality and the Paradox of Assimilation," *Immigration Policy Center Special Report* (2007): 14.
19. Ediberto Roman and Michael Olivas, *Those Damned Immigrants* (New York: NYU Press, 2013): 80.
20. Alistair Bell, "Americans Worry that Illegal Migrants Threaten Way of Life, Economy," Reuters U.S., (August 7, 2014).
21. David Card, "Is the New Immigration Really So Bad?" *The Economic Journal* 115.507 (Nov. 2005): 323.
22. George Borjas and Lawrence Kratz. "The Evolution of the Mexican-Born Workforce in the United States," National Bureau of Economic Research (May 2007); Gianmarco Ottaviani and Giovanni Perri, "Immigration and National Wages: Clarifying the Theory and the Empirics," (National Bureau of Economic Research, July, 2008).
23. R.W. Fairlie. "Estimating the Contribution of Immigrant Business Owners to the U.S. Economy," *Small Business Research Summary* (November 2008): 1
24. Guadalupe Valdez, "The World Outside and Inside Schools: Language and Immigrant Children," *Educational Research* 27, no. 6 (1998): 4–18.
25. Ted Cruz. Interview with Bill O'Reilly. O'Reilly Factor. FOX News (February 22, 2016); Donald Trump. Interview with Mika Brzezinski. Morning Joe. MSNBC (November 11, 2015).
26. Donald Trump. "Speech at USS *Yorktown*" (December 7, 2015).
27. Audrey Burnett and Zafar Syed, "Emerging Identities and Heritage Language Education," *Foreign Language Teaching and Language Minority Children* (1999): 105–117; Andrew Gitlin, Edward Buendía, Kristin Crosland, and Fode Doumbia. "The Production of Margin and Center: Welcoming–Unwelcoming of Immigrant Students," *American Educational Research Journal* 40, no. 1 (2003): 91–122.

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